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AUTHOR Waters, Alan
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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that a gap is developing in English for Special Purposes (ESP) between theory and practice, between received wisdom and grassroots activity that are important to understand when considering the future of ESP. Evidence for these gaps in ESP are discussed in detail in the context of course design, academic input, and the practitioners. Historically, ESP has been the product of two main inputs: theories and research about the nature of language and learning, procedures for course materials and design. It is argued that in a significant amount of recent ESP instruction, there has been a failure to achieve this degree of synthesis. If this problem is to be remedied, more appropriate types of theoretical and practical support for the ESP practitioner need to be developed. Suggestions for implementing such support are offered; they involve teacher development, curriculum design, teaching materials, and academic activity. (Contains 16 references.) (JP)

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ESP - Things Fall Apart?[1]

A paper presented at the 1993 RELC Regional Seminar, Singapore.

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Alan Waters,
IELE,
Lancaster University

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Introduction

The source for my title is Yeats' poem "The Second Coming". I have chosen it because I wish to use it as a peg on which to hang my impressions of the current problems facing ESP around the world, and the prospects for the future. Yeats' poem is concerned with the shift in human history from an age embodying one widely-accepted set of values, to another, embodying what appear to be rather different imperatives. In particular, he sees the trigger for the new age as a collapse of the traditional power-base (to use the language of our times), or, as he puts it:

> "Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned..."
>
> (The Second Coming, W. B. Yeats)

"The falcon cannot hear the falconer". Is the ESP "falcon" beginning to fly so far that it can no longer hear the call of the ESP "falconer"? "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold". Is ESP falling apart, is the ESP "centre" unable to hold? Is the "ceremony of innocence" for ESP at an end? Are we faced with a "second coming" in ESP, and if so, what does this mean for its future?

It is with questions such as these that this paper is concerned. For a number of years I have been involved in working closely, both in the U.K. and overseas, with ESP practitioners from many different parts of the world on a wide range of ESP development projects. These experiences have lead me to believe that, throughout the world, a "widening gyre" is opening up in ESP between

theory and practice, between received wisdom and grassroots activity, and we need to understand the causes of this rift and take them into account in the way we approach the future of ESP, lest "things fall apart". In what follows, therefore, I will first of all examine some of the evidence for this view, with respect to a number of main aspects of ESP. I will then discuss the implications of my findings and what I believe should be some of our future priorities.

The current situation: widening gyres

a) Firstly, course design

In the 1970s and 1980s, a "classic" paradigm of ESP course design practice began to emerge. Its main elements were (or were reported to be):

- a thorough investigation of needs as the starting point for course design;

- a tailor-made course design, related closely to the findings of the needs analysis;

- the production of "in-house" materials intended to match the course specification.

Much of today's ESP appears, at any rate, to continue to be based on this paradigm. However, for reasons which I will discuss later, it is nowadays also not infrequent to find gaps or mutations in this process, such as the following:

- firstly, a failure to begin the course design process by carrying out a systematic needs analysis, in the normal sense of the term, either in whole or in part;

- second, even when a needs analysis of some kind has been conducted, the findings do not always appear to have

properly informed the course design or choice of materials;

- third, there may be no course design, in the proper sense of the term, i.e. the development of an overall, detailed specification for all the main course elements: instead, the materials, which are predominantly published ones, tend to determine the nature of the course.

In other words, in my experience, the main features which have come to differentiate the ESP course design approach from the rest of ELT - rigorous needs analysis, specialised course and materials design - do not always characterise current ESP practice in the way they once did (or appeared to). Of course, "classic" ESP is still alive and well in many quarters, but, equally, it is more and more common to encounter a widening gyre of alternative practice.

It might be objected, however, that the situation I am describing was ever thus, that is, a sizeable gap between theory and practice in ESP course design has always existed. I think this is probably true to a greater extent than we are usually prepared to admit, and I will return to this issue later. But, meanwhile, suffice it to say that if this has indeed been the case, it actually re-inforces my point: in other words, however long-standing, a gap of this kind should be a major cause for concern.

b) Secondly, academic input.

It seems to me that another significant difference between the current state of ESP and that of the 70s and 80s is that the latter was driven along by a series of key papers and books, either produced directly by academics or inspired by developments in academic ideas. I am thinking, for example, of the writings of the

Trimbles, Selinker, Widdowson, Candlin, Swales, Munby, Carroll, and so on, to name but a few.

The point I wish to make is that throughout the period from around 1970 to the end of the last decade, a steady stream of works flowed from the academic world towards ESP and made a considerable impact on it, in terms of shaping fundamental thinking and practice in the field at large.

This flow has now become only a trickle, or dried up altogether. There have been almost no major contributions of this kind in recent years. The only possible exception is John Swales' Genre Analysis (Swales 1990), which clearly has the sweep and scope of a major work, but, in my view at any rate, is only of direct relevance to the minority (however influential) of ESP practitioners who are extensively involved in the teaching of advanced aspects of academic writing. Its potential is thus only a relatively limited one.[1] A reasonable amount of more minor work is being reported in various journals, but this does not, by its very nature, alter the basic picture. The result is that there is no longer a steady permeation of major new ideas, capable of widespread application, from the academic world to the bed-rock of ESP teachers.

It might be argued that this is not necessarily a bad thing: the ending of a top-down, theory-to-practice, input-oriented paradigm. It is, of course, vital for ESP ideas to be generated on a bottom-up basis, to arise out of the processes that occur in the actual practice of ESP. Academic ideas are certainly not the only nor necessarily the most important source of input for ESP. However, they have undeniably been one very significant source of thinking in our field, and to this extent any gap in the flow of major ideas from this quarter is a matter for concern.

c) Thirdly, the practitioners.

Until the beginning of the 1980s, ESP was still in an emergent phase, in the sense that it had yet to grow to anything like its present-day size. As a result, the number of practitioners then was far fewer than today. Also, they tended to be experienced and well-qualified, taught relatively small classes, were supported by a reasonable level of resources and enjoyed, in the main, advantageous conditions of service.

However, in this aspect as well, there has once again been something of a change in recent years. ESP has expanded considerably, and so therefore has the number of practitioners. Large ESP projects in the 1980s, such as those in Brazil, parts of Francophone West Africa, the Philippines, Thailand and elsewhere, as well as recent developments in Eastern and Central Europe, have ushered in a new generation of ESP practitioners. Like their predecessors, many are senior, highly-qualified and seasoned practitioners. In addition to maintaining and further developing existing "good practice" in ESP, many of them have also enriched it with the kind of perspectives - cultural, educational and linguistic - that only a native of the country where ESP is being taught can contribute (see e.g. Carreon (1988), Celani et al (1988), Tickoo (1988)).

However, it seems to me that among this new generation of ESP practitioners there are also a significant number who are relatively junior in terms of their years of experience and standing, and who sometimes even lack a significant level of training in up-to-date, "mainstream" ELT, let alone ESP (cf. Carreon, ibid). The classes they teach are relatively large, and the resources they have access to are often inadequate. Their conditions of service generally leave much to be desired.

As a consequence, a significant part of the practice of ESP is now in rather different hands than was the case 5 or 10 years ago, and the circumstances in which it is often taught have also changed significantly. In my experience, thus, practitioners of the kind in question characteristically experience difficulty in one or more of the following areas:

- the deployment of a reasonably learner-centred teaching methodology;

- the evaluation and selection of suitable teaching materials;

- the design of effective courses and materials;

- the solving of ESP problems in an intellectually rigorous manner e.g. by matching practice to theory appropriately, and the reverse.

Failings such as these obviously need to be made good.

d) Let me turn next to the question of teaching materials.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a steady stream of major ESP teaching materials initiatives took place. A few examples:

- Writing Scientific English (Swales, J 1971);

- the English in Focus series (Widdowson & Allen et al, 1974 - 1981);

- the Nucleus series (Bates & Dudley-Evans et al, 1976 onwards)

- the Reading and Thinking in English series (1979 - 80)

- the Skills for Learning series (1980 - 81)

and so on.

Each of these items had a major influence on re-shaping the art of the possible in ESP materials.

However, the contrast with the present-day state of affairs is a marked one. Other than in the area of what might be loosely termed "English for Business" (i.e. including English for Management etc.), there does not appear to be a great deal of ESP material being published at all. Furthermore, out of what does get published, none of the recent items appears to have broken really new ground. Typical in this respect is one publisher's recent EAP series, which, although one of the few major ESP publishing initiatives of recent years, is basically a revisitation of earlier series such as English in Focus (Widdowson & Allen et al, ibid), in terms of its overall approach and design. This is not to say that the ESP materials which have been published in recent years have not played a useful role. However, their role has been to broaden the existing base, rather than move forward. It is the element of real innovation which I feel is nowadays missing. Here again, thus, we have the problem of a widening gap.

A second coming?

Much the same basic point could be made for a number of other aspects of ESP, if time allowed. However, it should by now be clear it is my view that, in a number of its major aspects, ESP has indeed been "turning and turning in the widening gyre". I have tried to show how I believe the foundations on which ESP was built up during the 70s and early 80s have begun to shift. If things have not yet begun to fall apart, they certainly appear to be coming away at the seams: does this mean the centre will no longer hold? Is there a danger that

"mere anarchy" will be "loosed upon the world" of ESP? Are we about to witness an ESP "second coming"?

My own view is that there certainly is such a danger, but that if appropriate action is taken, it can be prevented. I believe that what we are witnessing is the recrudescence of ESP in a more pragmatic form, an attempt to incorporate the basic elements of ESP practice into the realities of the more typical teaching-learning situation. Historically, ESP has been the product of two main inputs: on the one hand, theories and research about the nature of language, learning and so on, and, on the other, practical procedures for course and materials design and so forth. When successful, there was a reasonable fit between the two, resulting in a coherent body of thinking capable of informing and guiding practical action, a blend of theoretical and practical insights.

However, in my view, there has been a failure to achieve this degree of synthesis in a significant amount of recent ESP. In other words, the gyre between theory and practice in ESP has started to become too wide: the "practice" falcon cannot hear the "theory" falconer. It is this problem which I feel is at the heart of the difficulties I have adumbrated. <u>If it is to be remedied, we need to develop more appropriate types of theoretical and practical support for the ESP practitioner</u>. In the next part of this paper, therefore, I will outline how I feel this might be done, with respect to a number of major areas of ESP activity.

<u>Teacher development</u>

To take ESP teacher development first: how might we approach it so as to take into account the current situation as I have described it?

Obviously, to be effective, ESP teacher development programmes, like any other, need to be pitched at a level appropriate to the background knowledge and theoretical awareness of teachers of the type who most need this kind of help - the more junior and less well-trained that I referred to earlier. I will briefly illustrate this point with reference to a course on "Curriculum Design" for ESP teachers. (Please note that I am using the term "curriculum" here in the same sense as I used "course" earlier on: this is because in this section I will also be talking about teacher development course design.)

Most such teacher development courses consist of two main blocks. The first tends to comprise work on topics such as needs analysis, theoretical inputs to curriculum design, syllabus specification, and so on. The second usually concentrates on materials evaluation, adaptation and design, and sometimes also on curriculum evaluation. Such an arrangement is logical and straightforward, since it goes from the identification of needs to the creation of appropriate learning resources, from the global to the particular, and indeed, mirrors the very sequence of events which it is usually recommended that real-life ESP curriculum design should follow.

However, I have found that, very often, a teacher development course organised in this way is too far removed from the schemata through which the course participants tend to view the ESP teaching-learning process. They often lack first-hand experience of the concepts in the first block, and the background theoretical knowledge that underpins them. This makes it very difficult to inculcate the kind of understanding of these matters that a teacher development course organised in this way depends on as part of the lead-in to the second block of work. As a result, work in the latter area is also often less effective than it might be, because of the cloud of misunderstanding and uncertainty generated by the unsuccessful work in the first block.

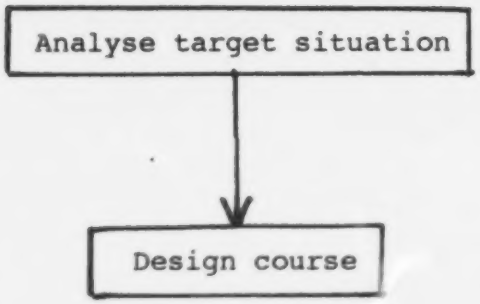
Because of this problem, I have found it works better if the teacher development course is organised the other way round i.e. so that it begins with the block concerned with materials evaluation, and so on, and then goes on to the block on needs analysis and so on afterwards. This approach tends to fit in much better with the existing knowledge of the participants, which is usually centred around working in various ways with materials, and only to a much lesser extent with other aspects of the practice (and theory) of curriculum design. In other words, beginning with work on materials plays to the participants' strengths, helping them build up the necessary confidence and understanding for successfully tackling the subsequent work on needs analysis and so on.

I hope this example serves to illustrate the general principle I have in mind for the kind of more flexible approach to ESP teacher development which I feel is called for in the light of the changed circumstances outlined in the first part of this paper. We must be ready to accept the audience as it is, and build from there.

ESP Curriculum Design

Let me turn next to the real-life ESP curriculum design process. Here also, just as with ESP teacher development course design, I believe there is a need for greater pragmatism and flexibility, if we are to narrow the gap between theory and practice satisfactorily.

At present, the basic theoretical model for ESP curriculum design which appears to be lodged in the minds of most practitioners is a target situation-based one, the essentials of which can be represented thus:



Target situation-based ESP

In practice, in my experience, the model is often not applied rigorously, as I mentioned earlier on in this paper. However, for many practitioners it nevertheless remains a kind of holy grail, an ideal to strive towards.

In my view, that this is so is somewhat disheartening and surprising, given the trenchant criticisms of the target needs-based approach which have been voiced from many quarters for some time (see e.g. Hutchinson and Waters (1987)). It has been increasingly recognised that such an approach fails to give due weight to the importance of the learning situation in ESP curriculum design. Since ESP is primarily concerned with language learning rather than language using (Hutchinson and Waters, ibid), it follows that such an approach to ESP is fundamentally flawed. It has also been criticised for being a static, input-oriented model, leaving out of account the process-oriented nature of much real-life curriculum design, of which I will say more shortly.

Why, one might therefore ask, despite obvious drawbacks of this kind, does the target situation model continue to hold sway? I believe there are a number of factors at play:

- first of all, the lure of academic respectability: the analysis of the target situation, using systems such as Munby's CNP or variations of it, despite their complexity, as well as the latest ideas from the science

of linguistics, lends an air of academic credibility to the enterprise;

- secondly, there is the weight of educational tradition: in many parts of the world, language teaching is seen as simply a matter of transmitting to the learner a description of how the language works: such an approach lends itself readily to the target situation ESP curriculum design model;

- third is the lack of an alternative: there has been a failure in our field to give widespread support and clear articulation to any alternative model.

However, whatever the cause, the "$64,000 question" is: what can be done to remedy the situation?

One step in the right direction would be for more to be said about the real-life difficulties of applying the target needs model. More of us than have done so publicly, at any rate, ought to be ready to admit that either the model, if used, fails to produce a viable curriculum,[2] or that the attempt to use it has usually had to be abandoned so that an effective curriculum could be created.

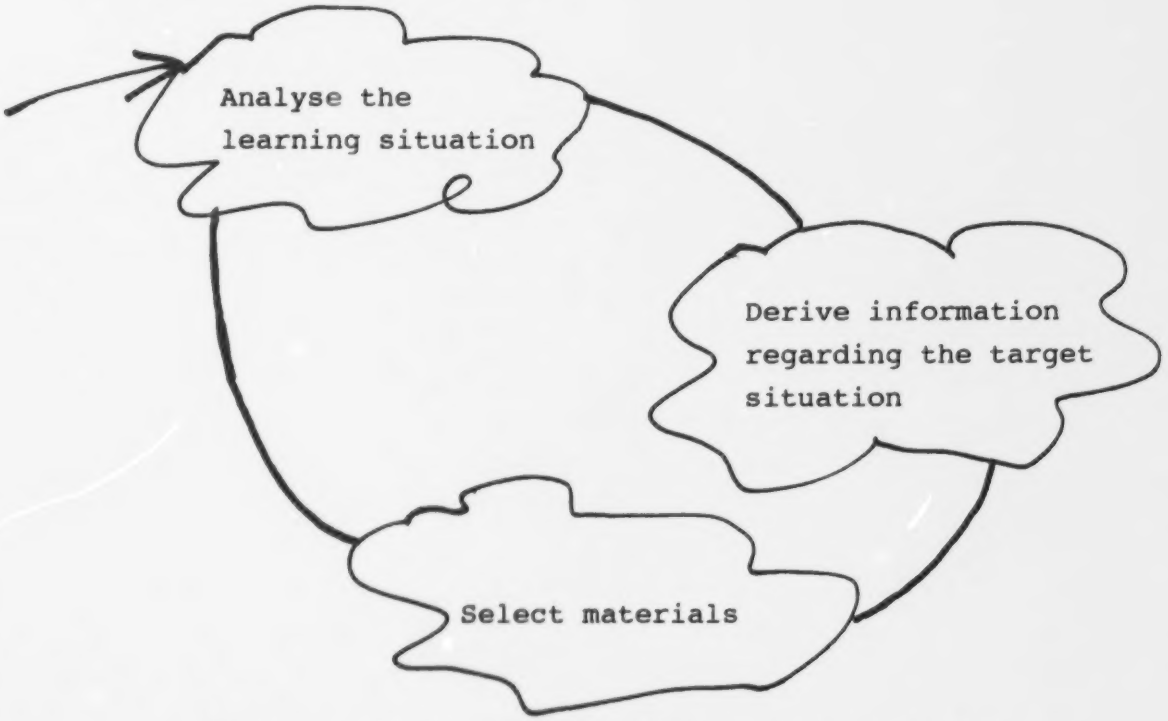
Secondly, we should do more to make ESP practitioners feel secure about the idea of basing the ESP curriculum design process on an analysis of the learning situation, and working outwards from there, much in the manner I discussed in connection with learning about ESP curriculum design a little while ago.

Such an approach would fit in better with the realities of much ESP work, where, very often, the only basic "given" is the learning situation: information about target needs is frequently inadequate, as are resources in terms of the time and expertise needed to create tailor-made materials. In such cases, rather than either

abandon the notion of doing any proper ESP, or embarking on an ambitious, long-term search for further information and resources, it makes more sense to exploit what is available, as best one can.

This is like the inexperienced cook, who follows the recipe in the book closely, and buys specially all the necessary ingredients, only to produce an inferior dish; the experienced cook, however, consults the recipe, makes up for shortcomings in available ingredients by adaptations and improvisations, and usually produces a superior result!

In terms of ESP, in other words, it is usually possible to derive a good deal of information about target needs from an analysis of the learning situation, and this can be used as a beginning, sufficient to start the curriculum pointing in the right direction. Ready-made materials which approximate as closely as possible to the requirement can be used as a beginning. This process can be represented as follows:



Learning situation-based ESP curriculum design

The resulting "design" will be only a first approximation. Once the curriculum is put into practice, however, further information will emerge from it that can be used to develop and refine the initial concept. In this way, the teaching-learning process itself informs the design of the curriculum. It is thus a process-oriented model for curriculum design, which reflects the fluid and dynamic nature of much real-life curriculum design.

In my view, we need to do more to publicise and give credence to practicable modus operandi for ESP curriculum design of this kind. Much of the time the information we need is scarcer, softer and fuzzier than the ideal (thus the substitution of "clouds" for boxes in the second diagram); it is also usually the case that the initial curriculum design is only one of a number of working hypotheses, to be modified in the light of subsequent events. In other words, ESP curriculum design, by its nature, is often much more of an on-going process than a one-off product. We need to recognise these everyday "facts of life" about the circumstances in which much ESP curriculum design takes place, and, as I advocated for ESP teacher development, build from there.

Teaching materials

Let me turn next to teaching materials. Recent trends in ESP of the kind described earlier in this paper have increased the need for published ESP materials to do their job as effectively as possible, since there is nowadays generally less of the necessary expertise and confidence among ESP teachers (as well as, frequently, the resources) for producing "in-house" materials. What new features should such materials contain?

a) First of all, content

The type of specialised language input which has characterised most ESP materials in the past was probably inappropriate for the needs of many ESP learners, focusing as it has tended to, on the performance repertoire rather than the underlying competence needed by the learners for communication in the target situation. But the need for less specialised language input is even stronger nowadays, since, in recent years, the audience for ESP has begun to include a much higher percentage of learners with only a limited command of English. Many of today's ESP learners thus need an improved understanding of the basics of English, rather than highly specialised input. Whether we like it or not, much that goes on at present under the banner of ESP is really only remedial English, an attempt to make good the gaps created by inadequacies at the secondary school level.

This is not to say that there is no need for more advanced content, but there is a far greater need for less specialised content which, nevertheless, has sufficient face-validity to distinguish it from the kind associated with general English. Such content would relate, broadly at least, to specialised fields of study or work, but would not be full of complex technical information. The texts would be of a kind which the averagely-educated lay-person can take an intelligent interest in. Such content would also have the advantage of being much more in keeping with the capabilities of the average ESP teacher of today, who is often quite unable to cope with the content in ESP materials of the traditional kind. Such content would thus be both "learner-centred and teacher-friendly" (Tom Hutchinson, personal communication).

b) Secondly, methodology. Here, also, there is a need for materials to become a lot more "teacher-friendly".

ESP is nowadays increasingly taught to large classes of poorly-motivated learners by inexperienced teachers with very limited resources. These are classroom "facts of life" which published ESP materials need to take into account. Materials which will work well in these circumstances should therefore include features such as the following:

- firstly, activities which do not rely on the teacher giving extensive individual guidance and feedback on language points: I mean, for example, activities which require students to think creatively, but which nevertheless involve only relatively simple, straightforward language, rather than the other way round, as is unfortunately so frequently the case;

- secondly, the most important methodological steps should be built directly into the student's book, where the teacher is more likely to use them: the materials would then not only serve their normal purpose, but also act as a catalyst for teacher development;

- third, for similar reasons much more extensive methodological guidance than is usually available should be provided in the teacher's book;

- fourth, and above all, there should be plenty of lively, challenging, stimulating activities capable of motivating learners who lack confidence in their ability to use English and who may tend to view ESP as only a requirement rather than in more positive terms.

In this respect, many a leaf could be taken from the best of the recent general English course books, such as Headway (Soars & Soars 1986 - 91), Hotline (Hutchinson 1991 continuing), Fast Forward 3 (Geddes 1986) and so on, or publications such as the Communication Games series (Hadfield 1984-87). These books all contain

methodological innovations well in advance of most published ESP materials, such as: lively lay-out; highly interactive, enjoyable and manageable small-group activities; an inductive, problem-solving approach to grammar; texts which contain information of interest in their own right; project-work; a task-based unit structure, etc. There is nothing special about the methodology of ESP which prevents such techniques being introduced in appropriate ways. In other words, the methodology of ESP materials could be improved considerably, at a stroke, simply by judicious "borrowing" of ideas from good mainstream ELT textbooks.

Academic activity.

Academic involvement has been important to ESP in the past, as already described earlier. However, a good deal of this input can and has been criticised for being concerned with matters closer to the academic world than to that of the average ESP teacher. The main focus of academic research related to ESP has been (and still is) to do with refining our understanding of the nature of language as communication in specialised settings. Information about the nature of language use is, of course, of undeniable importance to the ESP teacher, but of equal or greater importance is a better understanding of the processes of language learning, and how the various aspects of the practice of ESP affect this. However, in this area there is much less light being shed. Too often the language input tail appears to have wagged the learning process dog.

The balance could be redressed, however, if there was much more academic research into matters such as: the motivation of ESP learners (see Mead (1980)) for an excellent early example); the study of classroom uses of language; teacher decision-making, both inside the classroom and outside it (with respect to, for example, the thinking behind choice of teaching materials); the

process of innovation and change in the teaching situation; the study of how teachers actually gather information about and form impressions of student needs; the real-life process of curriculum design; the inputs to and methodology of ESP teacher development; and so on. (For an excellent example of a major piece of on-going research of the kind I am advocating, see Torres (in progress)).

Academic activity of this kind is not only vital for the kind of information it can provide, but in terms of the affective dimension as well. In other words, it helps to create a sense of identity for the ESP enterprise, and this an important factor in determining the ESP practitioner's sense of self-worth and improving his or her "bargaining position" with respect to sponsoring agencies and so on. Thus, academic involvement in ESP of any kind is important to preserve because of its effect on *ésprit de corps*. However, for this to occur to its full potential, the impact of academic ideas on the mental horizon of the average ESP teacher needs to be maximised. In my view, this will only happen if research into the realities of ESP teaching and learning is higher on the academic agenda than currently appears to be the case.

Conclusion

To conclude. I have made it clear that I find certain aspects of the present state of ESP unsatisfactory. I hope it also clear, however, that I have not drawn attention to these problems simply for the sake of carping. To quote Thomas Hardy, "If way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst". In other words, I have thought it important to first of all look dispassionately at present-day ESP in order to get as accurate a picture as possible of the current state of affairs.

In so doing, I have been at pains to deliberately focus on those areas of concern which, I feel, have not been receiving the attention they deserve. But my main aim has been to concentrate on what, in the light of my findings, I believe are the sorts of strategies we can adopt to remedy the situation. In my view, these should include a more flexible approach to ESP teacher development, an alternative paradigm for curriculum design, a revamped specification for ESP materials, and new priorities for academic input. In short, we should do more to develop the kind of tools - practical and theoretical - which are needed by a sizeable proportion of today's ESP practitioners in order to do their job.

I believe that initiatives of this kind should form a main part of our agenda for ESP from now until the end of the decade. As a result, I hope that by that time we will able to look back and see that we were able to help ESP successfully assimilate to its changing circumstances. If so, although the gyre may widen, the falcon will still be able to hear the falconer. Hopefully, things will not fall apart.

Acknowledgement

I wish to gratefully acknowledge the very helpful feedback provided by colleagues and course participants at Lancaster University on an earlier version of this paper. Shortcomings are my sole responsibility, however.

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[1] Despite the adulation it is currently being accorded by the academic world, it needs to be recognised that genre analysis is nc more than the latest in a series of attempts to base ESP on a description of language use (cf. register analysis, rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis and so on). All such approaches are fundamentally flawed, however, since the concern of ESP is not primarily with language use but with language learning. "We cannot simply assume that describing and exemplifying what people do with language will enable someone to learn it...a truly valid approach to ESP must be based on an understanding of the processes of language *learning*." (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 14).

[2] That this is the case may be obscured, however, if the learners are bright and well-motivated enough to learn anyway.

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